

HABS  
FLA,  
13-CORGA,  
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Coral Gables City Hall  
405 Biltmore Way  
Coral Gables  
Dade County  
Florida

HABS No. FL-363

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

HABS

FLA,

13-CORGI

1-

Name: Coral Gables City Hall

Location: 405 Biltmore Way  
Intersection of Biltmore Way, Le Jeune Road and  
Miracle Mile  
Coral Gables, Dade County, Florida

Present Owner, Present Occupant, Present Use:

City of Coral Gables  
Municipal Government Building

Significance:

The Coral Gables City Hall is a three-story, apsidal shaped structure of stucco and Florida quarry keystone rock. It is an outstanding example of Spanish Renaissance style architecture.

City Hall is particularly significant in that it represents one part of George Merrick's dream for a completely planned Mediterranean style city. Arcaded loggias, patios, fountains, old Spanish barrel tile roofs combined with native coral rock and tinted stucco give Coral Gables a distinctive flavor and style. Equally as important was the care taken in planning for all the social, cultural, recreational, commercial and personal needs of its residents. He planned an ideal city. An early promotional brochure describes Coral Gables as "America's Finest Suburb."

Physical History:

Construction began on the structure in July of 1927; E.E. Dammers, Mayor of Coral Gables laid a cornerstone during "Progress Week" ceremonies on November 10, 1927 and the building was formally opened to the public on February 28, 1928.<sup>1</sup>

City Hall was designed by Phineas E. Paist, Supervising Architect of Coral Gables; Denman Fink, Art Director of Coral Gables and Harold D. Steward, consulting architect.<sup>2</sup>

Phineas E. Paist was the supervising architect and coordinator of color for Coral Gables. Paist worked as associate architect on the Bellevue Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia and the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C. He was the architect for many residences in Coral Gables, but is most known for his designs of important public buildings in the city: City Hall, Douglas Entrance, designed in association with Walter deGarmo; the Christian Science Church and the W.P.A.-financed Coral Gables Police and Fire Station.<sup>3</sup>

Denman Fink, uncle of George Merrick, founder of Coral Gables, acted as Art Director for Coral Gables and later was Professor of Painting at the University of Miami. His works have been displayed at the National Academy, the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Boston Public Library. He was also a contributing artist for Harper's, Scribner's, Century and the Hearst magazines.<sup>4</sup>

Harold D. Steward also designed residences in Coral Gables. He and Phineas Paist formed the architectural firm of Paist and Steward in 1926 and practiced in Miami.

City Hall was constructed by the P.J. Davis Construction Company and cost more than \$200,000 to build. The native quarry keystone was obtained from the Florida Keys for construction.<sup>5</sup>

"A semicircular rotunda with 20-foot columns outside, a rectangular patio that is one of the most beautiful in the area, and a tower and bronze belfry duplicating others on the town hall in Seville, Spain are the chief architectural features of the structure seen from the outside. Another exterior feature is the Coral Gables coat-of-arms set on the roof of the rotunda midway of its circumference. There are entrances on three sides."<sup>6</sup>

City Hall's exterior appearance has changed minimally since its construction. There have been numerous interior alterations, specifically in 1956 and again after 1958. Further alterations were planned and possibly executed but no formal plans or drawings exist for these changes.

The Commission Chambers in the curving apse on the second floor were altered in the summer of 1956 at a cost of \$10,000 according to the specifications of Commissioner Lucille Neher. Originally, the room was lit by a continuous band of casement windows along the curve of the apse. This offered a spectacular view to the east of "Miracle Mile". The west wall of the chambers had an ornate, oak desk for the Mayor and oak paneling on the wall. A heavy, carved wood table with high-back Spanish leather chairs sat in the center of the room for the Commissioners. This area was roped off and rows of smaller Spanish leather seat chairs were arranged for public seating. In the alterations of 1956, the casement windows were shut and sealed and covered with wood paneling. The east wall is now the front of the chamber with a raised platform and formica topped coral rock table serving the Commission. There are rows of theatre style seating in the center of the room for the public.

The alterations after 1958 occurred on the first floor in the Finance and Collections Department. New counter space was installed along with new wood and glass office partitions. Drop ceilings and new lighting were also added. Before this time it was an open office plan.

The third floor was also renovated sometime in the 1950's for the Planning and Zoning and Engineering Departments. Originally, this floor housed the City's Health Department and laboratory. When the Health Department became part of Dade County's operations, this floor remained vacant until it was leased to the Federal Housing Administration in the 1940's. When they left it was remodeled for the Planning and Zoning and Engineering Departments. Partitions were installed and drop ceilings with new lighting were also added.

A new elevator was installed in City Hall in early 1954. Restrooms were renovated in the late 1960's and a new air-conditioning system added in the 1970's.

All corridors have been left in their original state.

The only major alteration to the exterior were the addition of handrails around 1970 and a handicapped ramp on the south side of the building in October 1973.

A sprinkler system was added in the rose garden, but there are no records or dates for this installation.

A small, outer building in the garden area was enlarged. It originally housed restrooms and a storeroom. Today, it houses the print shop and data processing center.

#### Historical Context:

City Hall was constructed during one of South Florida's most difficult financial periods. The Florida land boom had collapsed as a result of the devastating 1926 hurricane and the sudden deflation of real estate values. It was a noteworthy achievement to see that financing for construction of City Hall took place through floating of bond issues by the City Commission.

Between 1925-28, the City Commission held their meetings in the first City Hall building at 303 Alhambra Circle which is now the American Legion Post building.

On February 29, 1928, the Coral Gables City Commission held its first regular meeting in the new City Hall. Present were: Edward E. Dammers, Mayor; F. Wingfield Webster, Commissioner; Paul McGarry, City Attorney; Don Peabody, Commissioner; George E. Merrick, Commissioner; E.T. Purcell, Commissioner; Edwin G. Bishop, City Clerk and Robert M. Davidson, City Manager. They presented Resolution No. 525 that day to Phineas Paist and Denman Fink commending them for their artistic rendering, careful planning and painstaking supervision in the construction of City Hall.

City Hall has held most of the municipal offices since its construction. The original Mayor's office at the top of the stairs on the second floor was once very elaborate with a paneled wood ceiling painted in polychrome colors. The rooms were decorated with Spanish lighting fixtures and furniture. These rooms are no longer used for this purpose. Certain departments, once part of City Hall have now become part of Dade County's operations or phased out. The City Health Department and Tax Assessor's office have both become part of Dade County.

The first formal election of city officials was in 1929. The City became re-incorporated under a new Charter in 1929 and elections were held on June 11, 1929 with the following results: C. Lee McGarr, Mayor; Commissioners: M.B. Garris, H. Roger Jones, Vincent D. Wyman & John K. Tilton.

Two of the most important people associated with Coral Gables and City Hall are George E. Merrick, founder of Coral Gables and Edward E. "Doc" Dammers, first Mayor of Coral Gables.

George Edgar Merrick was born in Springdale, Pennsylvania on June 3, 1886, the son of Congregationalist minister Solomon Greasley Merrick and artist mother, Althea Fink Merrick. George came to South Florida in 1898 with his father where they purchased the Gregory homestead of 160 acres. With the rest of the family they built up a prosperous fruit and vegetable plantation. George managed the entire plantation by himself after his father's death in 1911. Merrick went into the real estate business in 1914 and accumulated land for his dream city of Coral Gables.<sup>8</sup>

The beginnings of Coral Gables date back to the years between 1911 and 1921 when George Merrick acquired much of the land in and around the original 160 acre family citrus plantation. In 1921, with 1,600 acres and \$500,000 in cash, an efficient sales organization, a personal knowledge of marketing land, and, most important, a developed city plan, Merrick was ready to begin selling. The streets and plazas were laid out in 1921 and in November of 1921, the first lot sales began. Merrick brought together the talents of expert architects, city planners, artists and engineers who designed the earliest notable Coral Gables landmarks.<sup>9</sup>

Edward E. "Doc" Dammers, who used medicine show tactics from a mule-drawn cart to sell land was the City's first mayor. In the early years, Dammers was a selling agent for George Merrick and Coral Gables. Prior to this he sold lots for Carl Fisher in the development of Miami Beach. Dammers had a charismatic manner that was most effective in selling land and if

that was not persuasive enough he gave gifts like sets of dishes to those who bought lots.

Description of Exterior:

Coral Gables City Hall is designed in the Spanish and Italian Renaissance style. This three-story, apsidal shaped structure is constructed of quarry keystone rock, masonry and stucco finish.

The curving apse is the most notable feature of the building. It is semi-circular in plan and faces "Miracle Mile" to the east. The base is of smooth rectangular stone blocks pierced by twelve casement windows at regular intervals. The center of the base contains a panel with a stone relief face over a half basin which sits in a semi-circular pool. Water runs from the mouth of the sculpture into the basin and the pool. The upper portion of the apse has two-story composite order columns around the colonnade. Engaged columns and ten casement windows are recessed into the walls. Four doors, evenly spaced interrupt the window pattern. In the center of the wall is a large bronze plaque commemorating the persons involved with City Hall. Above the columns is a simple entablature topped by a stone balustrade interrupted at the center by an ornate, relief panel depicting the coat-of-arms of Coral Gables. The coat-of-arms was designed by Denman Fink and it shows a shield with Spanish emblems, a lion, crocodile and fish. On each side are figures representing Labor and Art, and in the background is a scene suggestive of Venetian Pool Casino.

City Hall is crowned by a three stage campanile and belfry copied from the town hall in Seville, Spain. Each stage is of masonry, square in shape and smaller than the one below. The second stage has four arched windows and each corner is topped with a console and finial. The uppermost stage has a clock on each side and a tile roof. It is topped by a bronze belfry, 500 pound bell and weathervane.

There are entrances to City Hall on the north, south and west sides. The north entrance has engaged pilasters supporting an entablature in which the words "City Hall" are inscribed. Two molded relief face panels flank the engaged pilasters and window of the second floor. An elaborate broken pediment with an urn and swag design tops the entrance.

The south entrance is flanked by engaged columns supporting a narrow balcony. The balustrade on the balcony contains a panel with the words "City Hall" inscribed. Each side is topped by a finial. The balcony also has engaged pilasters, an entablature and an ornate shield. Matching shields are on each side of the balcony above windows.

The west facade entrance and balcony are located in a two-story niche. Engaged columns flank the doors on the first floor and an arched niche on the second floor. At the top of the niche is another ornate shield. The balustraded balcony overlooks the garden courtyard which is enclosed by walls on the west and north, the west facade and a loggia on the south.

Renaissance style architecture is distinguished by its scale and size. Large buildings of usually three stories are organized into distinct horizontal divisions by belt coursing. Each floor is articulated differently. City Hall's first floor is treated simply with the Doric Order and cut block walls with no decoration. The second floor is "piano nobile"<sup>10</sup> or the most ornate level with the largest windows and more decorative order of columns. The third floor is again treated differently with smaller windows and a projecting cornice. Spanish and Italian influences can be seen in the use of emblems and shields, barrel tile roofs, belltower and heavy architraves around the windows.

The roof of City Hall is of Spanish, barrel tile.

The interior of City Hall is equally as impressive as its exterior. On the first floor is a huge, stone and masonry stairway modeled after one in Cordova, Spain. The corridor has an arched ceiling with a Venetian style lantern hanging in the center. The flooring in the corridors is terrazzo. The walls are of stucco finish with stone wainscoting. Stone arches and pillars are at the entrance of the stairway on the first and third floors. The ceilings are vaulted only in the area leading to the Commission Chambers on the second floor. Heavy oak doors along the corridors lead into the various city offices. Wall sconces of iron grace the walls.

On the wall at the landing of the stairway is a wall mural painted by artist John St. John. It is entitled "Landmarks of the Twenties" and depicts buildings and scenes from the early years of Coral Gables. He was commissioned to do the 20 foot by 13 foot mural by Commissioner Lucille Neher in 1957 at a cost of \$2,800.

The most outstanding feature inside of City Hall is the gilt and multi-colored mural in the belltower. This dome mural was originally painted by Denman Fink and restored by John St. John in April 1957. The central part depicts the four seasons -- spring, summer and autumn as the faces of young women wearing laurels of their season. Winter depicts an old, bearded man. On the four sides of the dome are paintings of Florida vegetation. The mural is completed with decoratively painted brackets on each of the four sides.

City Hall was constructed on a large pie-shaped piece of land. It faces northeast and is the focal point for the commercial district of "Miracle Mile."

On the east side facing "Miracle Mile" is a small landscaped area with shrubs that form the year of the city's incorporation and the present year (1925 - 1981).

On each side of the apse are flagpoles with the American and City of Coral Gables flags. These flagpoles were originally of steel and had the "CG" (Coral Gables) logo at the top of the poles. These flagpoles have subsequently been replaced with standard aluminum flagpoles.

Prepared by: Carol R. Alper

Historian

Coral Gables Historic  
Preservation Board  
of Review

August 24, 1981

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Munroe, R.M., "Beauty Emphasized in New City Building,"  
The Miami Herald, July 28, 1929.
- 2 IBID
- 3 Wilkins, W.W., "Coral Gables: 1920's New Town", Historic Preservation, Vol. 30 No. 1, Jan-Mar 1978, p. 9.
- 4 "The Story of Coral Gables", promotional brochure, Coral Gables, Florida, p. 7.
- 5 Munroe, R.M., "Beauty Emphasized in New City Building",  
The Miami Herald, July 28, 1929.
- 6 IBID
- 7 Moore, Mary T., "Coral Gables History", Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce, 1950, p. 3.
- 8 IBID, p. 2.
- 9 IBID, p. 2
- 10 The Old-House Journal, Vol. IX No. 1, January 1981, p. 19.

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- "Fink's Work in Catch-All," The Times, May 23, 1957.
- "Restoration of Denman Fink Murals Started at City Hall," The Times, April 18, 1957.
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